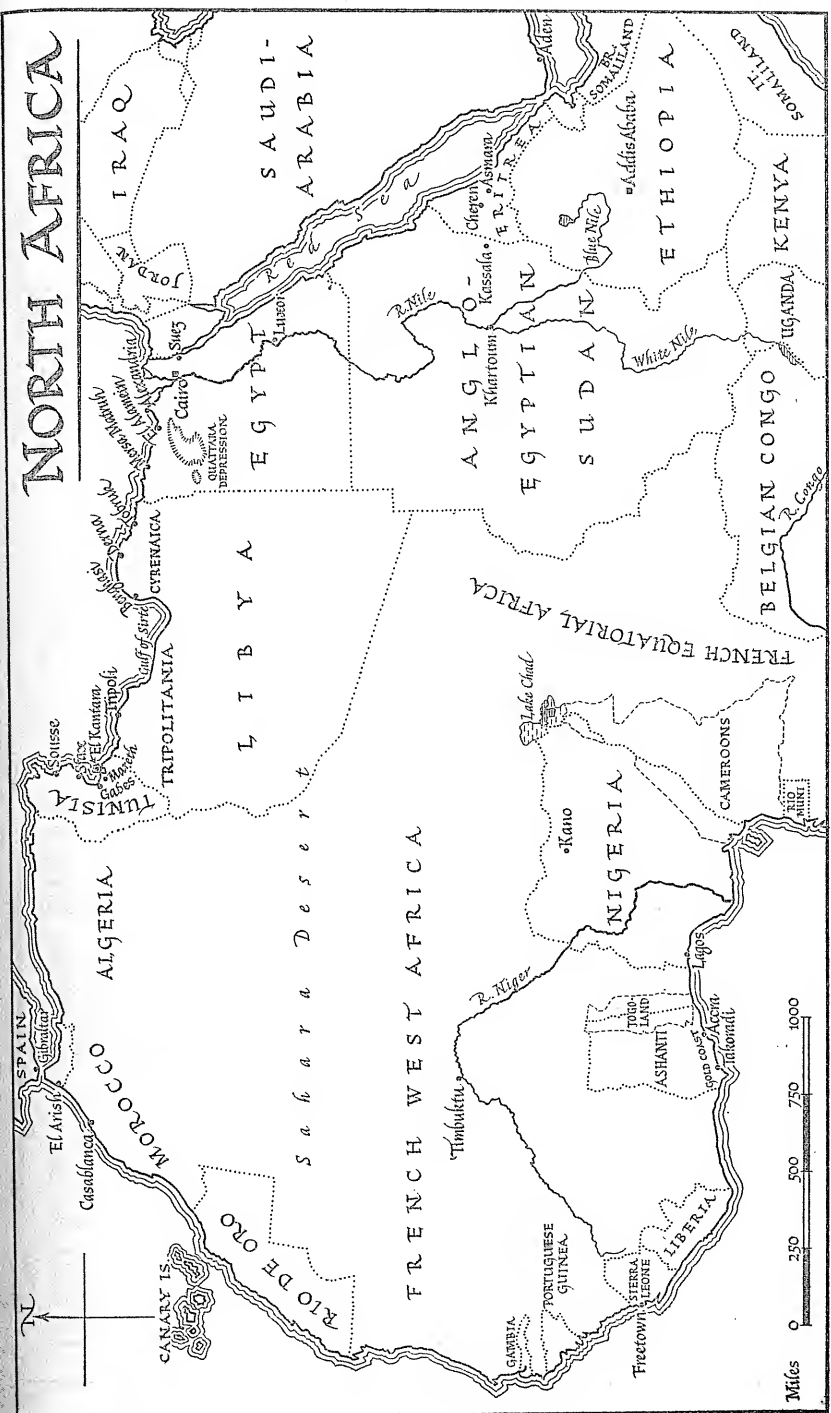


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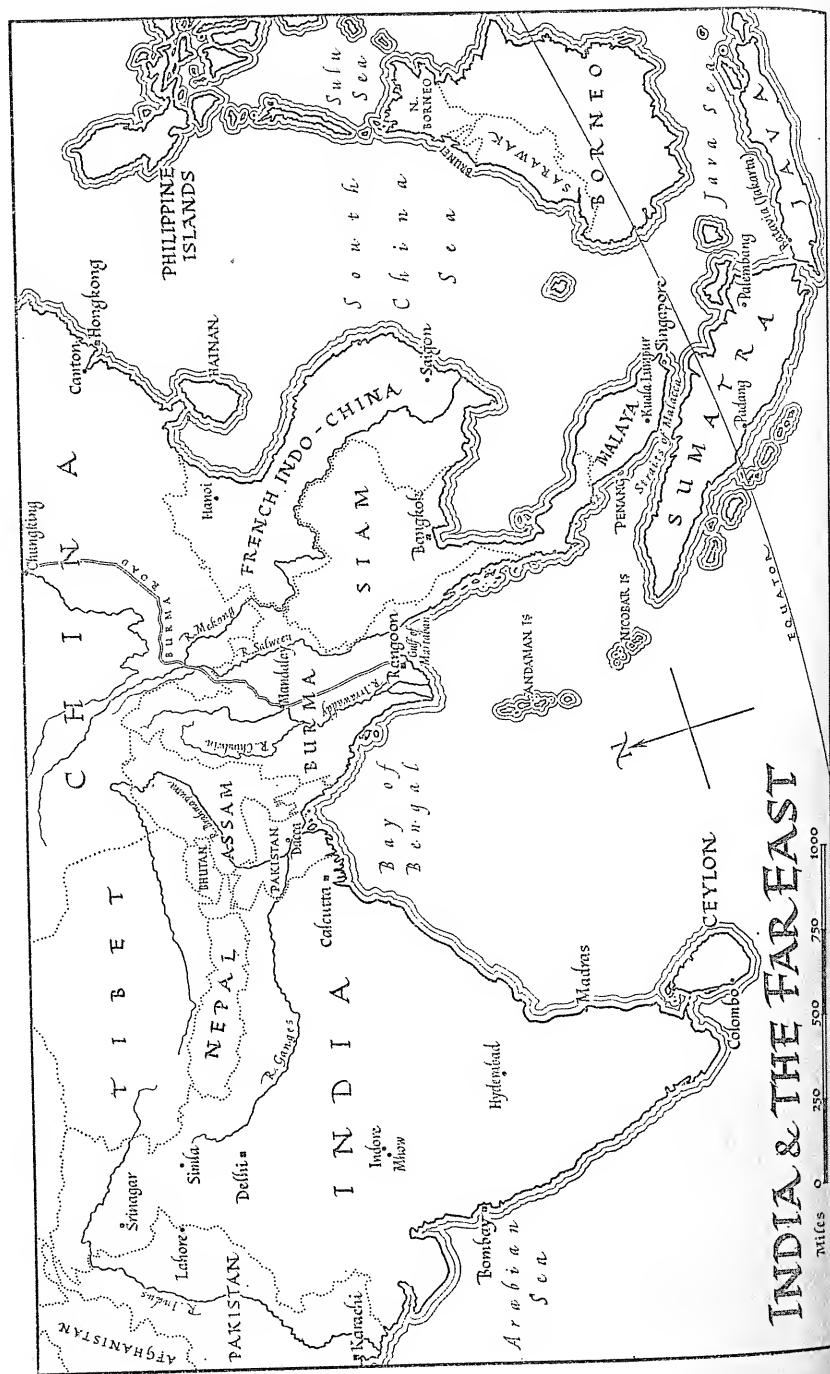
THE SECOND WORLD WAR



# NORTH AFRICA









## CHAPTER 12

### FLANDERS, 1940

THE years of peace which followed the First World War were by no means uneventful years for Q.A.I.M.N.S., which throughout the period between 1918 and 1939 grew steadily in prestige and efficiency. There was continuous progress, especially on the administrative side. Again after the Second World War ended, Q.A.I.M.N.S. (and with it T.A.N.S.) were to undergo a complete transformation into a self-contained and self-administered Corps of the British Army Medical Services, of equal standing with the R.A.M.C. and the R.A.D.C.

How that transformation was brought about is described in full detail in Chapter XXIII of this volume.

In the meantime we will continue with the operational history of Q.A.I.M.N.S.—this time during the Second World War.

Few of us will ever forget Sunday, September 3rd, 1939. The recollections of the present writer are vivid enough.

At 11.15 on that morning I switched the desk-telephone in my room at the War Office through to the Press Room, in which a loudspeaker had been installed, and heard Mr. Chamberlain announce to a listening world that the British Empire was now at war with Germany. Almost directly afterwards the sirens sounded, and we descended dutifully to our emergency offices in the sub-basement, there to await our first raid. It proved to be a false alarm, but the incident emphasized the grim reality of the whole situation. The balloon had gone up at last, and Armageddon was on the way.

In September 1939, as the reader will remember, our country had had a full year in which to make up some of the time lost during the previous era of indecision and inertia, and we were



now at least as well equipped, so far as the Army was concerned, as we had been in 1914. Mobilization, including that of Q.A.I.M.N.S., Reserves and T.A.N.S., was effected with efficiency and dispatch. The story of the Q.A.I.M.N.S. is that of Reserves and T.A.N.S. also, and 'Q.A.I.M.N.S.' (Q.A.s) should be taken for all.

As in 1914, the first task of the War Office was to dispatch the British Expeditionary Force to its battle stations in France, in conformity with a solemn agreement long concluded between our French Allies and ourselves.

But here we were confronted with a difficulty never previously experienced in our history—the possibility, the certainty almost, of overwhelming attack upon our transports from the air. Britannia still ruled the waves, but no one could tell for certain as yet who was going to rule the skies. At any rate, it was known that some 950 enemy bombers were assembled in the aerodromes of Western Germany, ready to pounce when the word came that our 'troopers were on the tide'.

Obviously, to dispatch great convoys to France by the shortest route (as had been done in 1914) was out of the question, for Calais and Boulogne lay nearer to the German frontier than any other ports on the French coast. Landing ports as remote as possible from enemy air bases must be the objective of our crowded troopships.

Finally Cherbourg was selected for the troops, and Brest, Nantes, and St. Nazaire (this last on the Bay of Biscay) for the landing of their vast stores and innumerable vehicles. By this precaution, and the employment of a minimum of advertisement—here our Press co-operated most loyally—the entire Force was conveyed safely across.

The risk was shared, and as cheerfully accepted, by the Nursing Services. A standing tradition of the British Army had ceased to be: henceforth there was to be no male monopoly of any of the hazards of active service. Equipped with steel helmets and gas-masks, Q.A.s went overseas like the rest. The first contingent were landed at Cherbourg on September 10th and 11th, within one week of the Declaration of War.



Here are the experiences, in brief, of a later contingent—bound for Havre in this case.

The routine followed was much the same as that of twenty-five years previously. The party arrived at Southampton by train and were sent straight on board ship. Here they were issued with life-jackets and iron rations and were allotted cabins. The furniture of these was not luxurious, consisting as it did of a single mattress, without blankets or pillow. But no one cared: 'fair stood the wind for France', and the spirit of adventure soared high.

There was the usual delay in the Solent, as the ship swung at anchor waiting for the fall of night. Relief from monotony, however, was obtained by listening in to a characteristic disquisition from a neighbouring N.C.O. to his followers upon the regulations governing the proper handling of the iron ration.

After impressing upon the men, a Sister tells us, that the iron ration could only be consumed on the order of an officer, the N.C.O. continued:

When you are torpedoed, though, and have remained in the water for not less than twenty-four hours, you are at liberty to open your iron rations without waiting for any officer's order at all.

Truly, the spectacle of a contingent of R.A.M.C. privates placidly swimming the Channel with an iron ration in one hand and a penny in the other, with which to open the tin when the appointed twenty-four hours should have elapsed, would have reassured anyone foolish enough to question the high morale and perfect discipline of the British soldier.

At last the anchor was weighed, and the silent, stealthy crossing was made under the escort of a British destroyer, which was relieved by a French destroyer in the early dawn.

After a brief pause at Le Havre came a series of aimless excursions from pillar to post, common to that period of the war—Mr. Churchill has recently described it as 'The Twilight War'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the second volume of his War reminiscences, *Their Finest Hour*.



—in search of legitimate employment. *Faute de mieux*, this particular unit settled in a French village, opened an out-patient department, and visited the sick of the local population in their homes. Their outstanding obstacle in this self-imposed task was to overcome the passionate objection of their patients to having a window opened.

## II

The early dispositions of the B.E.F. were based, not unnaturally, upon the experience of the previous war.

But not entirely. The French frontier, where it actually marched with that of Germany, was now covered by the much advertised Maginot Line, which was deemed by all patriotic Frenchmen to be impregnable. To the left lay the little neutral State of Luxembourg, and beyond that the Franco-Belgian frontier, which the British Expeditionary Force was busily fortifying in considerable depth. It was therefore generally assumed that there could be no lightning invasion by the enemy of Northern France, *via* neutral Belgium, this time.

This being so, our Medical and Nursing Services could approach their task with some degree of method. Permanent General Hospitals could be erected in the principal base-ports, railheads established at suitable points behind the line, to and from which the hospital trains could ply; and a provisional chain of casualty clearing stations organized at appropriate points.

In other words, the general expectation at this time seems to have been that we were in for another prolonged campaign of static siege warfare, waged upon either side of a trench-line running from the North Sea to Switzerland.

But the campaign, whatever form it was to take, hung fire strangely. It had been generally expected that the German Army which had been training intensively for this war for at least four years, and for the moment had no Eastern Front to consider, would take the initiative and advance to the attack at once. However, Hitler seemed in no hurry to begin; for nine months deceptive calm reigned in the West—a respite which the Allies



gratefully employed to strengthen their defences and complete the training of their troops.

The Medical Services likewise made the most of their opportunity. General Hospitals sprang up in the neighbourhood of Le Havre, Dieppe, Le Tréport, Étapes, Camiers, and Boulogne—all completely furnished and equipped, and all destined, alas, to be utilized within a few months' time not by the British but the German Medical Services.

More Q.A.I.M.N.S. arrived from home with their various units, hospitals, casualty clearing stations or hospital trains. The Principal Matron<sup>1</sup> arrived in France and took complete control. Lord Gort had established his General Headquarters at Arras (a centre familiar enough to the old soldiers of the 1914 war), situated at a convenient distance from the Belgian frontier, along the whole length of which the B.E.F. now aligned itself. Its front covered some fifty-five miles, extending from Maulde, in a north-westerly direction, to Halluin immediately south of Menin—another familiar name—then south-westerly, along the little river Lys, to Armentières and Grisons. Within the salient formed lay Lille, the second city of France.

### III

The winter of 1939-40—and a cruelly hard winter it was—passed by, and still the Phoney War hung fire. Only in Lorraine, on the banks of the Rhine, was there any actual contact with the enemy, and our sole casualties were those incurred by British troops attached to the French Army in this particular theatre for actual experience of fighting. Q.A.I.M.N.S. for the time being had little to do beyond the nursing of the sick and ministering to the needs of the local population—an attention highly appreciated and conducive to good feeling all round.

Still, no one was altogether happy. The troops had come to fight, and the Medical Services had come to tend the troops. But the troops had no one to fight and the Medical Services had

<sup>1</sup> Miss K. H. (later Dame Katharine) Jones.



few casualties to occupy them. There was a growing feeling of boredom and frustration, which peripatetic concert parties from London did little to allay. Moreover, reports regarding our Ally were not reassuring. The French soldier in the heat of action is incomparable; keep him in idleness and suspense and he begins to brood. He has not the cheerful endurance and *sang froid* of the Anglo-Saxon. There were disturbing rumours of *cafard* in the Maginot Line, where the Fifth Column had been busy.

Then suddenly, and practically without warning, the storm burst. On May 10th, 1940, with complete and characteristic disregard for the sanctity of treaties or the rules of civilized warfare, Hitler invaded Northern France, via neutral Luxembourg, simultaneously with neutral Belgium and Holland.

The B.E.F. immediately crossed the Belgian frontier, on to soil hitherto denied to them by the obligations of neutrality, and took up their battle positions along the little River Dyle, with the French First Army on their right and the Seventh Army on their left; and the battle was joined.

Then, and not till then, was it fully realized how utterly obsolete the tactics of the 1914 war had been rendered by the march of time and the phenomenal development of the internal combustion engine. Gone for ever were the days of pitched battles and limited objectives. The total mechanization of ground warfare, supported from the air, had bestowed a new and terrifying mobility upon the attack. Concentrating upon the weakest point in their opponent's line, the German Panzer (or Armoured) Divisions were enabled to crash through the resistance of the French Ninth Army, already demoralized by propaganda, and cleave their way, without once pausing to consolidate positions or secure flanks, straight for the Channel ports. Within a week they were in Abbeville, and a few days later in Boulogne. Thus, within an incredibly short space of time, the Allied Armies had been cut in two by a corridor many miles wide, and several British coastal bases overrun.

The combined effect of this unbelievable catastrophe upon the organization of the Medical and Nursing Services of the British Army can only be imagined. It certainly cannot be described in



full detail here, but the story can be pieced together, in some measure, from a study of the very large number of individual reports and personal narratives available to us.

These fall into three categories—the Hospitals, the Casualty Clearing Stations, and the Hospital Trains. Let us consider them in turn.

The story in most cases is much the same. It begins with a record of intensive bombing raids upon most of the base hospitals during the night of May 9th, and of the brief period of shock and bewilderment which resulted, occupied chiefly in the hasty improvisation of shelter for the patients. Then came the turmoil and confusion engendered by a panic-stricken civil population, intensified by the arrival of a horde of Belgian refugees, streaming southward with such of their worldly possessions as they had been able to salvage, and thus hopelessly impeding the movements of the troops.

In these circumstances each Q.A.I.M.N.S. unit became a law unto itself, coping to the best of its ability with its own particular emergency. One and all displayed the same resolute indifference to their own welfare and the same cheerful devotion to their patients.

Then, in due course, came the resumption of official control, the gathering together of scattered units, and finally, from this port or that, by any means of conveyance available, evacuation to England.

#### IV

Let some of the participants in this nightmare period speak for themselves.

Here is an average example. The Sisters concerned in the matter—or one might with truth describe them as the heroines of this particular story—were the members of a casualty clearing station warned for immediate duty upon the announcement of the German attack. There were eight of them in all, that being the number normally allotted to a C.C.S.

The unit was somewhat scattered at the moment, upon tem-



porary duty at Le Tréport and in its vicinity. The group with whom we are concerned were bidden to repair forthwith to Béthune, where the rest of the unit were 'reputed' to be. (Nothing was certain in those days.) They accordingly left Le Tréport by train early next morning, only to be held up at St. Pol, the line ahead having been heavily bombed. St. Pol itself was a highly important road junction and traffic centre, some twenty miles west of Arras.

The streets [reports the Sister who tells the story] were full of transport of all descriptions, while more and more of it, approaching the town, added to the general confusion. It was quite impossible to obtain anything to eat, though it was not yet 11 a.m. This was the first time any of us had seen a mass evacuation, and one so completely uncontrolled. We were appalled to see it, and amazed at the number of young Frenchmen not in the Army. We saw none of our own troops till much later.

Our own troops of course were farther north, in Belgium by this time.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, however, contact had been established with Béthune, and a lorry had arrived. Béthune itself was already being evacuated, and the orders of the party were to proceed northward with all speed. The lorry made its way, not without difficulty, through Arras and Lille to a small village, Avelin, not far from the Belgian frontier, where a neighbouring chateau was being converted into a hospital, or rather, first-aid post.

The earliest patients to arrive were French and Belgian civilians, suffering from wounds arising from the inveterate German habit of machine-gunning all refugees within range.

The following day came the order for all civilians to evacuate.

Being a small village, the evacuation had some semblance of order. Before leaving, the shopkeepers sold us all their remaining stocks of chocolate and biscuits—not a great deal, but very welcome to us.



Our Sisters, it will be observed, being cut off from their unit, were cut off from their rations as well.

That evening the Sisters were the only people left in the village itself. The men were accommodated in the chateau and grounds. My billet-companion and myself felt so lonely that we went to bed early.

But not to sleep; for they were aroused almost immediately by a medical officer with orders that, for greater safety, they were to transfer themselves to the chateau, some two miles away, through the pitch darkness of the black-out. Even so—

We had little sleep that night. An anti-aircraft battery was stationed in the grounds, and what with enemy bombing and A.A. firing, the noise was guaranteed to prevent anything of that kind.

Next morning came yet another move. The eight Sisters were packed into an ambulance and dispatched in the direction of Lille, only to be diverted from their course by the proximity of the advancing enemy. Ultimately they found themselves in Lincelles, near Armentières, where they were billeted in the local civilian hospital, staffed by French Sisters of Charity. They were still cut off from all supplies, and were grateful for the contribution, meagre though it was, made to their scanty stock by these kindly women.

But this was destined to be the briefest of respites. Early next morning came an order for four of the party to report for immediate duty at a field ambulance outside Tournai. This was unusual, for as a rule no Sisters are employed in a field ambulance; but in this hectic Odyssey everything was unusual.

On arrival two of us went to the improvised operating theatre and two to the wards.

(Let us bear in mind that they had now been on the move for



four days and nights, practically without sleep and on the scantiest of rations.)

We worked in the theatre continuously for over twelve hours, having one short break of about a quarter of an hour, when we ran out of anæsthetics. During this break we managed to make and drink a cup of tea. Our sterile dressings were soon used up, so we improvised by soaking the uncut rolls of gauze in a Lysol solution and cutting off a length as needed.

It was impossible to keep track of the patients operated on. We had no pause for clearing up during cases: as one man was removed from the operating-table another was placed on it. Instruments were hurriedly washed and then flung into a bowl containing pure Lysol. We kept on the same rubber gloves until they split. The whole day the hamlet was being machine-gunned from the air.

Late that night we were told we must evacuate, as the position by then was unsafe. The patients had been evacuated throughout the day, as soon as their condition warranted. It was our first experience of really extensive wounds. I well remember one man of, I think, the Green Howards, who had a large gaping chest wound, with part of his lung shot away. It was impossible to give him an anæsthetic: we could do nothing for him but apply a dressing. His only remark was: 'You *will* patch me up, so that I can get back to my pals, won't you?' He died later during the day, and so was saved from becoming an 'un-evacuatable wounded'. We could never reconcile our feelings or our training to leaving such cases.

The four Sisters returned to Lincelles that night. The other four were still absent, and during the day transient refugees had looted the hospital of every scrap of food, except some very dry prunes. Next morning was devoted to a search for further provender, without success. But there was plenty of hot water.

We were now feeling distinctly dirty. We tossed for



who should have the first bath. Just as the lucky Sister started to undress, a rather perturbed Staff Officer came to the front door. 'You must be out of here within five minutes,' were his words to us.

Thereafter their experiences were merely a repetition, or rather an intensification, of those already described. After two more strenuous days with the same field ambulance, with little rest and less food, they encountered their own Quartermaster, who informed them that they were urgently needed by their own unit, who were now somewhere in Belgium.

Needless to say they discovered upon joining their unit that, owing to the overwhelming number of cases to be dealt with, they must get to work without waiting for the full meal and brief rest for which they had been longing.

I worked until 4 a.m. and then rested until 8 a.m. I say 'rested', but the only spot to rest was on a deck-chair by the side of a lift. . . . During our working hours we did occasionally swallow a cup of coffee, which our batman seemed able to produce on demand. Our sterilizing orderlies were grand. The surgeon and the anaesthetist never seemed to take any rest. The anaesthetist did one spell of thirty-six hours on duty.

There were stretchers everywhere: we even had wounded men on stretchers in the bathroom. Air activity was persistent. Ypres was in flames, and waves of bombers were continuously passing overhead: at times it seemed as if they mistook our hospital for some kind of headquarters.

The invincibility of the human spirit is a wonderful thing, as the reader may judge from the final passage in this narrative:

On May 28th, *to our great sorrow*, the Sisters were ordered to leave. With very sad hearts, and feeling like deserters, we said good-bye to the unit.

They were driven to the outskirts of Dunkirk, which was under



heavy fire, and after a most trying wait of several hours were embarked upon a waiting transport, which then set out for Newhaven, pursued by artillery fire from the French coast.

They landed next morning, safe, 'but very dirty, very untidy, and very tired. It was twelve days since we had taken off any of our clothing':

The rest of the unit followed them two days later, leaving an R.A.M.C. corporal, according to traditional practice, to take care of the unevacuable wounded. He was of course taken prisoner, but was later heard from in a camp in Poland.

Another such experience, perhaps even more testing, was that of two C.C.S. units which, after the usual period of intensive ambulance and hospital work, followed by the usual sudden evacuation order in the small hours, eventually joined forces at Lillers. (Arras, Béthune, Lillers, Aire, and Hazebrouck all lay more or less in line on the road to Calais in the north-west. Twenty-five years previously, and for nearly four years more, that line had covered part of the trench system of the old Western Front, and each of those little townships had furnished a well-remembered and well-loved billeting area for the B.E.F. of those days.)

From Lillers on May 19th the Nursing Sisters were dispatched by train to Hazebrouck, the lorries and ambulances proceeding by road. The railway line was frequently blocked by enemy bombing, and stoppages were numerous and protracted; but it was now evident that the party were *en route* for one of the Channel ports, and hearts were uplifted accordingly.

But danger and discomfort were by no means ended. There was the usual difficulty about obtaining water for washing, while drinking water was unobtainable; so 'dry rations' were the order of the day.

After Hazebrouck the situation became distracting in the extreme.

About 1 p.m. [one Sister tells us] while the train was running parallel with the road twenty yards away, enemy aeroplanes appeared. The road was crowded with lorries



full of soldiers and of refugees. All were bombed or machine-gunned. The sight was appalling. One lorry of French soldiers directly opposite our carriages suffered badly. Our Medical Officers rendered first aid.

Matters however became so serious that at 4 p.m. it was decided to leave the train and continue by road to St. Omer.

An ambulance came out for us, and we were immediately taken into a wood and given shelter and some tea. From there we proceeded to an empty chateau, where we spent the night in a cellar. We did not move till next morning. Enemy aeroplanes were constantly overhead.

By 8 a.m. an ambulance was ready to take us nine Sisters and the padre. At Bergues our orders were changed, and we were told to proceed to Calais. We passed through Dunkirk about 12 noon. It had just been bombed, and at one part a huge fire was blazing.

Between Dunkirk and Calais we were delayed three hours, as we were refused permission to cross a fortified bridge.

(This was probably because the bridge had been mined for demolition. Ultimately the party made a detour and crossed by a smaller bridge.)

We reached Calais at 4 p.m. The Alert sounded as soon as we got into the town, and we had all to take to the shelters. The place was deserted except for refugees. The shops were shut, buildings burning and smoking. We said good-bye to the padre, who handed us over to the Area Commandant.

Next morning, after another thoroughly disturbing night, the nine Sisters were embarked on board the cargo steamer *City of Christchurch*, crowded with some 2,000 soldiers. They were accommodated in the cabins of the captain and his officers. Their last memory of Calais was that of two enemy aircraft shot down as they left the harbour.



The gallant padre, previously mentioned, did not accompany them. He stayed on the quayside at Calais, tending the wounded and dying until he was himself killed.

'I shall always remember his goodness to all of us,' another Sister tells us. 'He was indeed a very brave man.'

## v

We turn now to the experiences of Sisters serving in hospitals. Here, as usual, our choice must perforce be selective.

In contrast to the casualty clearing stations, the General Hospitals, especially those lying near the Channel ports, enjoyed a brief period of immunity before being subjected, apart from some inevitable bombing raids, to the full fury of the Nazi invasion on May 10th. Indeed the tribulations of a fortunate few were comparatively short-lived, for at the end of the first fortnight it had become clear to the British military authorities, with the severance of General Georges' command (including the B.E.F.) in the north, from the main body of the French Army south of the thirty-mile 'corridor', and the surrender of the Belgians on Lord Gort's left, that a complete evacuation of Northern France (if that were still possible) was the only course left open to our forces.

Consequently various base hospitals were ordered to evacuate forthwith. Some of them so far had received no patients to speak of, which meant that the evacuation in their case would be limited to members of the nursing staff, who could no longer be usefully employed in France. Other hospitals were to carry on, tending and evacuating the wounded for as long as possible. If the present situation worsened, a further, perhaps complete, exodus might become necessary.

Such an evacuation was not going to be easy, hampered as it would be by transport difficulties consequent upon the almost complete dislocation of road and rail services; for the enemy had penetrated as far as Abbeville and the Channel coast less than ten days after the initial attack. The bombing menace had also to be considered.



There were, as we know, General Hospitals at Dieppe, Boulogne, Camiers, Le Tréport, Étaples, Cherbourg, and La Baule, all situated on the coast, and some of these were evacuated with comparative dispatch. No. 16 General Hospital, at Boulogne, was shipped to England within ten days of the invasion.

Others fell into a different category. The British Army at this time occupied something like one-third of the soil of France, and several General Hospitals were situated some way inland, remote both from the Channel ports and the battle-line. Indeed, it was some little time before the full gravity of the situation was brought home to these.

The only indication of the state of affairs in Northern France [reports a Sister of No. 9 General situated near Le Mans] was the increase of traffic, caused, first of all, by a stream of private cars loaded with family possessions, then lorry loads of refugees from Belgium, and later still the usual pathetic procession of weary pedestrians.

Finally the war casualties began to arrive; at first the slightly wounded, then patients evacuated from other hospitals nearer the Line, and then men evacuated straight from the Line itself.

It should be noted that this particular hospital was able to carry on at full pressure as late as June 9th, almost a week after the final evacuation of the B.E.F. from Dunkirk, and without interference from the enemy. This was because it lay south of the 'corridor' and was presumably in no immediate danger.

But on the evening of that day came the ominous order, 'Pack!'

The first reaction of the Sisters to this abrupt command was acute annoyance.

We had felt [remarks one Sister] that we were at last doing the work we had been waiting to do all these months; and now that we were really needed, we were told to leave it



all, without so much as hearing a gun fired or a bomb dropped!

However, orders are orders, and by four o'clock next morning the evacuation had taken place to Le Mans, where the Sisters were entrained for Cherbourg. (Presumably such hospital patients as remained at this time had gone forward by road.) The Sisters had accommodation reserved for them in the train: the rest of it was packed with refugees. Food was, as usual, unobtainable, and recourse was had to private stores of chocolate and biscuits. The journey was slow and tedious, but Cherbourg was reached at last. (Cherbourg, La Baule, and St. Malo were by this time the only ports in this particular theatre unoccupied by the enemy. Q.A.I.M.N.S. units were evacuated from St. Malo as late as June 15th, 1940.)

The Sisters were embarked next day, and after travelling through a thick mist, which slowed the ship's progress to a crawl but screened her from enemy bombers, reached Southampton the same evening.

No. 9 General, incidentally, was not the last of the hospitals in Northern France to be evacuated during this period. No. 1 General, based on Dieppe, did not reach home until June 18th, by which time France had asked for an armistice, and the entire B.E.F. was booked for evacuation.

One other evacuation should be mentioned here—that of No. 10 General Hospital, as described in the words of a Nursing Sister of the Q.A.I.M.N.S. Reserve. Her story brings out, poignantly enough, the special difficulties attending the evacuation of a hospital containing a number of particularly helpless patients.

The first fortnight was a busy one for us at No. 10 General Hospital. Convoys of wounded arrived four-hourly, and patients were evacuated once or twice a day.

We saw no newspapers, and had no time to listen to the wireless news, and therefore knew nothing of the German break-through, so it was a great surprise on May 21st to



go on duty and find others coming off with orders to pack and leave.

The Matron chose sixteen of us to stay and evacuate the patients. One Medical Officer, one Anæsthetist, the R.C. Padre, and sixteen orderlies also remained. The rest of the unit left in ambulances to form a new hospital where we should soon join them—so we thought.

About 2 p.m. several officers arrived from another hospital and told us that the Germans were getting close. Eventually ambulances arrived, and patients were transferred to them. I was in charge of an orthopædic ward, and the majority of the patients were on Pierson beds, or had limbs suspended from Balkan beams. Many of them had to have a short anæsthetic before they could be transferred to a stretcher.

When we arrived in Dieppe we found the two hospital ships on fire! We returned to No. 10 for the night.

At 5 a.m. next morning we set off again to Dieppe. There we sat in the rain for two hours, and eventually climbed into cattle-trucks marked 'Forty men or Eight Horses'. They had recently been used for horses, and now held 75 of us, mostly women and children refugees.

Dieppe being for the present out of action as an evacuation port, the party set out in their horse-van for Cherbourg. Fortunately their numbers were reduced in time to twenty-six, and there was room to lie down.

The first stage of the journey took them as far as Rouen. It is superfluous to mention that the trip is described as slow and uncomfortable, with frequent stops to mend the line. Meals, too, appear to have been even more unorthodox than usual, even for that time.

At 5 a.m. we had breakfast of French bully beef and champagne. It was horrid. Later, an officer-patient produced two dixie-cans, and the ten of us drank red wine out of one and washed in weak red wine in the other!



We reached Le Mans about 5 p.m. and sat on the roadside waiting for some conveyance. A lorry arrived after about two hours and took us to a hotel. We slept two or three in a bed, which had been vacated for us by the officers living there.

The party reached Cherbourg next day, and crossed in a hospital ship. Our Sister, whose morale nothing seems to shake, ends her narrative on this most characteristic note:

While on board, we managed to make ourselves look fairly presentable.

## VI

The experiences of the Sisters in charge of the ambulance trains was in some respects more continuously trying than those in the hospitals and casualty clearing stations, for trains are continuously on the move, and moreover furnish a conspicuous and inviting target for the German bombers.

These trains fell roughly into two categories—those actually operating in the Low Countries at the time of the invasion, and thus liable to encounter the enemy at close quarters and at unexpected moments, and those based farther south. These latter continued to operate right up to the final evacuation. Many, in the forward areas, were immobilized or put out of action comparatively early in the campaign, and their nursing staffs had to be evacuated home after a fortnight of shattering experience. Others, operating farther afield, were at work right up to the time of the French surrender in the middle of June and the final evacuation of the B.E.F. and of Q.A.I.M.N.S.

The function of all the ambulance trains was normally the same: they plied between railhead and base, conveying wounded for evacuation. But after the invasion, and the consequent disintegration of all transport services, these ceased to run to any regular schedule or to carry purely military cases. They travelled wherever they could find an unblocked line, picking up



their passengers as often as not at some wayside station or remote siding, under constant threat of attack from the air.

Coming to actual instances, let us begin with a brief description of what may be called an average routine evacuation of that period—that of Ambulance Train No. 13.

The story begins on Wednesday, May 15th, when the train lay awaiting orders just outside Lille—in other words, well within the battle zone. The invasion had been in progress for five days, and all available reinforcements were being sent up into the Line. One of the Nursing Sisters on board the train gives us a vivid description of the scene, most of it familiar enough to the reader by this time:

We saw more British and French troops moving up. The windows in a great many of the carriages of the train carrying refugees were broken, and many of the carriages themselves riddled with holes made by machine-gun bullets. The station was crowded with lost and terrified-looking refugees, who continued to stream into it, in train after train of cattle trucks.

As was becoming now quite normal, sirens wailed almost ceaselessly, and aerial battles between our own aircraft and those of the enemy were taking place over our heads at very frequent intervals. The Belgian engine-drivers who had driven the refugee trains through were a frantic and hungry collection of men, and told tales of bombardment *en route*; of the rapid advance of the Germans, and of the plight of Belgium. With British troops preparing to evacuate,<sup>1</sup> we all wondered quite what *we* were waiting for.

The question was soon answered by an order to be prepared to take on a trainload of patients, who were due to arrive from various casualty clearing stations that afternoon. The loading was uneventful but laborious, for each stretcher had to be carried over two railway tracks and down a long platform—170 cases in all. They were a motley collection. Some had just been

<sup>1</sup> These were probably Administrative units. The time for evacuating the fighting forces was not yet.



released from hospital and were practically convalescent, others, mostly Belgians, had come down the line from Ghent, and were seriously ill. Later on the train moved right into Lille, where a fresh batch of wounded were taken on board, by bright moonlight now. Most of these were serious cases—men straight from the casualty clearing stations, many of them with nothing but a first field-dressing. It was one o'clock in the morning before the work was done, and there were now 350 patients on board—French wounded, a Spahi, and a severely hurt Belgian civilian. There were five German officers, of the most arrogant type, quite certain that they had won the war and demanding preferential treatment—which they did not get. Indeed, they were unceremoniously dumped at the first opportunity and left for their friends to take care of.

Obviously the next and most pressing need was to get the train to some port of evacuation; but for reasons already stated this was not too easy.

At six o'clock next morning we reached St. Omer, where the station was entirely blocked with traffic. While our water-tanks were being refilled we saw poor helpless refugees begging to be taken on board trains, and noticed English nuns among the mass of humanity being loaded into the cattle trucks. At seven o'clock our train moved on, this time with Calais as our objective, and spirits rose high.

But hope was disappointed. Calais proved to be under heavy bombardment: the harbour was practically out of action and the railway tracks broken up. After a wait of several hours the train moved slowly on again, by-passing Boulogne, to Étaples, near Le Touquet.

The congestion on the line was terrific; continuous dog-fights were going on overhead, and bombs were bursting close by. We gave a second shot of morphia to all our seriously wounded and bad fracture cases.

But Étaples had no comfort to offer. An agitated French



station-master announced that the Germans were only eight miles away, and that the station was to be blown up forthwith! So the weary pilgrimage was resumed—this time back to Boulogne, which, it was found, was being very heavily attacked from the air. The spectacle, however, appears not to have been without its attractions.

We waited outside the town and had a magnificent view of the town and harbour. The roar of planes overhead was terrific, and we saw British Blenheims fly over the town. Then bombs began to fall. The train shook and rocked violently, but we came through quite undamaged, without even a broken window, though the patients, in that confined space, were badly frightened.

There was nothing for it then but to beat a retreat from Boulogne, down the line as far as Dannes-Caniers, some twenty miles south. Here the German wounded were unloaded, and some welcome comforts, in the form of N.A.A.F.I. cigarettes and chocolates, taken on board in their place.

At one o'clock next morning a second visit was paid to Boulogne, now quiescent. It was Wednesday, May 22nd, and Ambulance Train No. 13 had been on the move for the best part of a week.

But the journey was nearing its end at last, for some of its personnel at least—probably selected as being especially deserving of a rest.

The train was moving slowly, though we had no idea where we were or where we were going. At 7 a.m. we were told to pack. Then, much to our surprise, the O.C. gave us orders to be ready to get off the train, which had by this time come to a standstill in a station. It started to move again, so, acting on orders, we jumped out in what we stood up in, and sadly watched the train move off.

There were nine of us all told—three Sisters, one Officer patient in charge of the party, another Officer acting as guide, and five British Other Ranks.



We crossed from one Boulogne station to another [Boulogne Ville to Boulogne Maritime, presumably] in a downpour of rain which did not look as though it had the least intention of stopping for days. We were met by an officer who told us that we were going home, but as yet there was no boat to take us. Our guide having left us, we waited on the station platform amidst hundreds of battle-worn troops. A cheerful Padre brought us cups of tea. Finally we moved off in single file, between lines of troops with fixed bayonets, who were stopping the refugees from rushing the ships at the quayside. We climbed up a gang-plank on board a destroyer, where we were taken down to the Petty Officers' Mess and given breakfast.

The destroyer in question put forth about noon. It was a noisy journey. Depth charges were dropped, a mine exploded by machine-gun fire, and there was a low-flying attack by an enemy aircraft. But our little party were safely in Dover by the afternoon and the adventure was over.

So much, then, for a comparatively normal evacuation. But those concerned in our next story had a sterner time of it. The story deals with the adventure of No. 3 Ambulance Train, during the final week of the Battle of Flanders.

On Sunday, a most beautiful day [the tale begins], we stopped at a small railway station. There was an air of excitement and tension among the French there: the advancing Germans were only four miles away. The convoy of wounded that we had come to meet had not got through to us.

We picked up about 50 of the refugees and took them along to a safer place, the poor creatures being most grateful for the rest and food.

Early next morning we stopped at Verneuil, having heard that the convoy would meet us there. We were just finishing a meal when one of the batmen came racing down the train, shouting, 'Sisters, get your tin hats! Jerry's here!'



We rushed to our bunks to get them. I glanced up and saw three planes, flying low and coming like the wind towards us. There were seven altogether, I believe. I reached No. 1 Coach, where our patients were, as the first bomb exploded. Two Sisters were seized by an Orderly, who made them lie on the floor and not move.

This orderly, a very young man, seems to have behaved like a veteran. He exhibited the greatest courage and devotion, we are told, and helped our Sisters to soothe the patients, some of whom were already badly shocked and kept screaming at the explosions. Fortunately there were only ten of them, for the main body of the convoy had never arrived.

Bombs, aerial torpedoes, and machine-guns were all employed. A French troop-train lying alongside was in equal danger. An ammunition train, a most undesirable neighbour on such occasions, had left just before the raid began. The station itself was crowded with civilian refugees.

At last the raid was over. Our beautiful ambulance was cut in two. No. 5 Coach was like a crumpled matchbox; some of the carriages were tilted over; broken glass and earth covered the train. The French troop-train was in ruins; the poor dead horses looked most pathetic; the station was devastated. Sadder still, one Orderly had been killed and nine or ten others more or less injured. Some of them had wonderful escapes, one being blown clear of the train as the middle coach collapsed.

The dead were taken to a convent near, poor little girls and women among them, also dead soldiers (French). In the evening we got away in the first three coaches of the train, feeling it dreadfully that we had to leave the body of our brave Orderly under the wreckage.

All this, as already indicated, happened a few days before the final French surrender. Our Sisters' task was done. They were conveyed to La Baule, a pleasant little watering-place on the Brittany coast, and two days later arrived at St. Nazaire.



Crowds of our troops kept pouring in, on their way home. Some of them came up and asked us for food as we sat on what was left of our luggage: they had been for hours with nothing to eat. We gave them chocolate and biscuits, whatever we had. They were wonderfully cheerful; many had pink roses stuck in their caps.

Next morning the Sisters of No. 3 Ambulance Train, with others, embarked on board the C.P.R. liner, *Duchess of York*, and after two days at sea came safe to Liverpool.

We come lastly to Ambulance Train No. 4, stationed on the fateful May 10th at a village just outside Dieppe. The staff consisted of five medical officers, three Sisters, and forty orderlies.

For the first few days their work was of a routine character and comparatively free from serious alarms. Then real trouble started. The train at this time was standing at the village of Nivose, in Belgium, loading up with wounded from a casualty clearing station.

Very soon our convoy was coming on board [says the narrative], and we eventually filled up. Two cases had to be operated on at once in our little train theatre.

By this time enemy activity was intense. The C.C.S. had to be disbanded. We took the Sisters and some Medical Officers on board our train about midnight, with enemy aeroplanes over us dropping bombs near; but anti-aircraft guns kept them at bay.

The departure of No. 4 from Nivose was rendered no easier by the fact that by this time the Belgian railway system had lapsed into chaos. Indeed the British medical officers on the train had themselves to assume the role of traffic directors—a duty in which they displayed considerable resource and *expertise*.

When we were ready for departure, the Belgian engine-driver refused to take the train out of Belgium: the O.C. had to put a British armed guard on him before he would move.



Our next difficulty was that all the signals were against us. The O.C. had to get off the train and fight the signals at every station until we got out of Belgium.

Dieppe was reached next day, May 18th. Here the arrival of No. 4 was greeted with joy, for the train had been absent for a week and almost given up for lost.

The sick and wounded were immediately distributed among various General Hospitals, pending the time when they should be fit for the strain of evacuation home. This was just as well, for next day Dieppe was heavily bombed.

'We all sheltered under the train,' remarks our Sister casually, 'until the raiders had passed.'

Upon May 21st No. 4 set to work again, evacuating the occupants of Nos. 1 and 10 General Hospitals, together with the Indian Hospital, from Dieppe, which was getting altogether too hot for a hospital centre.

There were between six and eight hundred people on board. Many of the patients were seriously ill, and the hurried journey in the ambulances from the hospital to the train did not improve their condition. However, we made them as comfortable as we could in the circumstances, while waiting patiently for an engine for the train.

The reader will not be altogether surprised to learn that the engine was not immediately forthcoming, and that while it tarried a heavy raid took place. The train endured several near-misses—almost as demoralizing as direct hits—and two hospital ships, *Maid of Kent* and *Brighton*, lying at the dockside close by, with a tanker, were set on fire, to the imminent peril of No. 4 itself, which soon began to burn too.

Our walking cases ran off the train to shelters, and were machine-gunned on the way; many of them were killed and many wounded.

The train was now a blazing inferno. I went along to see



how the patients in the other wards were. It was a very pathetic sight to see men in Thomas splints hobbling along by the bedsides; also, patients with heads swathed in bandages. These advised me not to enter, as the ward was 'gassed'. This gas was really the fumes from the tanker, which had been bombed near to the ward. All the windows being broken, the fumes quickly entered, and the ward was a mass of thick black smoke. It cleared off fairly quickly, and the patients were put back to bed and reassured that they would be all right.

Many huge pieces of iron from the oil-tanker shot through the woodwork of the train from one side to another. Fortunately nobody was hurt.

Meanwhile the O.C. train, with much willing help, had contrived to uncouple the burning coaches from those still intact. This done, and the wounded men having been transferred from the train to the care of the medical officers in a neighbouring shed, he ordered a motor ambulance, and insisted that our three Sisters should proceed by it to Le Havre forthwith.

One of the three could not be found, and it was at first feared that she had become a casualty. Finally, after an anxious search, the other two were compelled to set off without her.

The pair arrived at Le Havre the same evening, having characteristically broken their journey long enough to pick up a boy of eleven years old, suffering from a compound fracture of the femur, bandage him up with the field-dressing attached to their gas-mask equipment, and deposit him at the first French hospital.

Upon arrival at Le Havre, they found to their dismay that the hospital to which they had been ordered to report had evacuated. It was a bitter blow, for they were reaching the end of their strength, and no wonder. However, a cup of tea and a few helpful words from the R.T.O. had their usual effect, and they took the road again, this time for Rouen, which they reached in the small hours of the morning.

Needless to say they found an air raid in progress, so pressed



on to a large military camp beyond the city. This too, they found, had evacuated, but by a dispensation of Providence the canteen workers were still there. The immediate result was a proper meal and a couple of stretchers to lie on for an hour or two.

But not to sleep. Another air raid started, answered by A.A. artillery, and our Sisters, deciding that a military objective was no kind of dormitory for Q.A.s, summoned their ambulance and its driver and set off, in heavy rain, for Le Mans. Our recording Sister does not forget to note, with gratitude, that when the need for more petrol became pressing, the Red Cross allowed them precedence over a long string of other applicants.

They reached Le Mans next afternoon, and made immediate inquiry of the R.T.O. as to whether No. 4 Ambulance Train had passed that way.

He said that it had passed through, bound for La Baule, and he 'could see nothing but heads, there were so many people on board'. We were delighted to hear that they had got safely away. We took a new lease of life, and joyfully proceeded to Rennes, where we arrived at 10.30 p.m.

At Rennes the R.T.O. rang up the Matron of No. 8 General Hospital on their behalf, and the Matron sent the Assistant Matron to meet them at the station and convey them to comfortable quarters. They had fallen on their feet at last. Indeed—

We were treated more like heroes than refugees by the Matron and Staff [reports our Sister, to her evident surprise].

The missing Sister also rejoined them about this time.

It was now May 29th, and evacuation of hospital units had become general. Upon that day our Sisters received orders to rejoin No. 4 Ambulance Train at Rouen, which they did 'joyfully'.

Their next summons was to Le Mans, where they found all the patients from No. 9 General Hospital laid out on stretchers



on the platform, having lain there all night. For once they did not have to wait for an engine; with the result that they were able to reach La Baule next morning, where they deposited their patients at the now unoccupied No. 4 General Hospital. On the way to Le Mans they had been heavily bombed while standing in a wayside station. But this time the visitation presented one element of novelty. The train had come to a standstill alongside a huge gasometer. The Sisters took shelter under the usual hedges, with the gasometer towering above them—a most uncomfortable neighbour in the circumstances. Fortunately it did not explode.

Upon their return to La Baule the party were informed that 'the Sisters of No. 4 Train were released from duty, and were to remain at La Baule pending further orders'.

This news was greeted much as the reader would have been justified in expecting.

Needless to say, we were very upset at leaving our train and the people we had worked with for over eight months.

But the 'upset' was sensibly mitigated when it was revealed to our Sisters that their supersession was a prelude to evacuation. They were going home at last, after more than six weeks of nightmare journeyings, continuous duty, and perpetual danger.

Next morning they proceeded to St. Nazaire, to find themselves, after climbing 'very steep ladders from the tender to the first deck', on board the *Duchess of York*, in company with some 5,000 troops and many other Sisters.

Two days later they found themselves in Liverpool, whence they proceeded to London.

On the afternoon of June 19th [concludes our matter-of-fact young historian] we reported at Millbank Hospital, received orders for leave, and so ended our B.E.F. experiences in France.



## VII

As a postscript to the foregoing record, and a reminder that the adventures of Q.A.I.M.N.S. during this period were not confined to Northern France, here is a description, by a Nursing Sister stationed in the British Military Hospital in Marseilles, of the events leading up to our final evacuation of Southern France.

Marseilles, it seems, was left in comparative tranquillity until the beginning of June, when German bombing set in in earnest. On June 1st there was a heavy raid on the docks, and the Orient liner *Orford*, now a transport conveying coloured troops, received a direct hit, with casualties which filled the British Hospital to overflowing.

Bombing soon became a daily occurrence, and the hospital had several narrow escapes. With Italy's entry into the war the situation intensified, for there were hundreds of Italian residents in Marseilles, and the police were soon busy rounding up suspects. The French population, too, were getting out of hand. They were increasingly hostile towards the British, having been persuaded by skilful Fifth Columnists that our country was somehow responsible for their misfortunes.

Finally, with the surrender of France on June 17th, it became obvious that the sooner the British element, which included hundreds of refugees, was transported home, the better.

The British Hospital was evacuated on June 19th, and patients and Nursing Sisters conveyed on board an old tramp steamer, the only vessel available. She was packed to suffocation, but room was found for thirty patients, eight Sisters, and some orderlies. The British Consul and his entourage were also on board.

Ten days were occupied in a slow and cautious crawl along the Spanish coast.

We had been warned [says our Sister] to render our uniform as inconspicuous as possible, and not let our red capes be seen. The ship following us was attacked by a German submarine, but we proceeded safely.



Gibraltar was reached on June 29th, and here it was found possible to transfer the entire party to a properly equipped transport, the *Dunera*. It was a difficult operation, for the race was running high, and some of the stretcher cases had a rough time of it. But all bore up bravely.

The ship, of course, was crowded. Besides British military and hospital units, there were some 1,800 refugees, mostly semi-invalids from the Riviera towns.

There were many pathetic cases—elderly and infirm people who had lost literally all they possessed, quite bewildered and unable to understand their plight. Many were suffering from physical and mental shock; they had endured great privation in the colliers and other small craft in which they had escaped.

The worst cases were taken, with the military casualties, into the ship's hospital, where they were tended by the Nursing Sisters and so enabled to recover their morale.

The spirit of all on board was marvellous [concludes our Sister], in spite of anxiety over lost possessions and the future.

All arrived safely at Liverpool on July 4th. More than three years were to elapse before a Nursing Sister would again set foot upon the soil of France.